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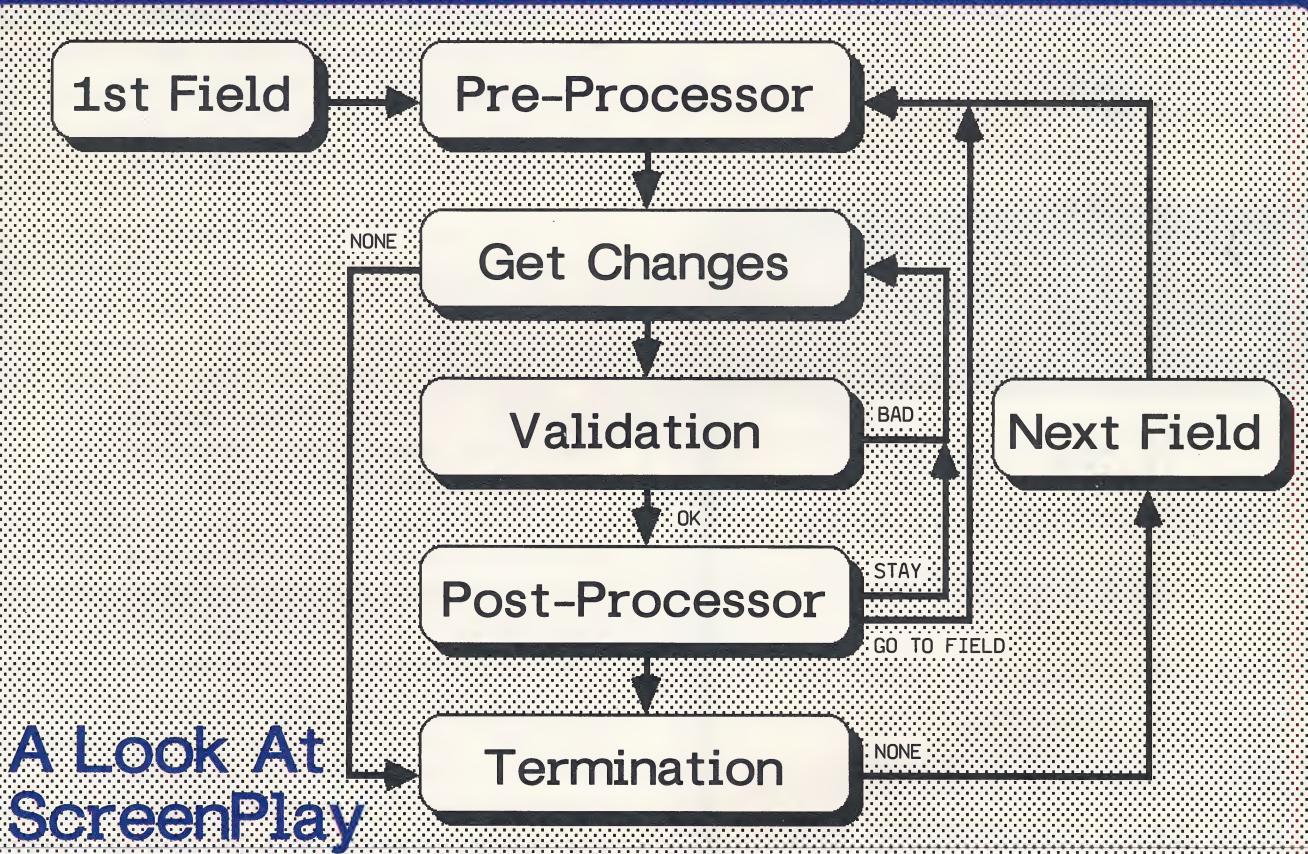
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News And Information For Pick™ Operating System Users

Issue Number 8

November 1984



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Issue #8 • November 1984

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A Look At ScreenPlay

Users who need to implement software on machines using the Pick operating system quickly discover that, even though there is a very powerful data retrieval and report generation tool for getting data *out* of a Pick machine (that's the facility usually referred to as ENGLISH, although that name belongs only to the Microdata implementation), a standard tool for easily getting data *into* the system is not available.

As a result, a number of software vendors provide products designed to make up for that deficiency. One such offering is the ScreenPlay system available for \$1,695 from DigiCorp, 1275 Ft. Union Blvd. #225, Midvale, UT 84047, 801-562-2227. As we mentioned in an earlier issue, DigiCorp sent us a copy of ScreenPlay so that we could take it for a test drive and publish our findings. What follows is a description of our discoveries as we tried ScreenPlay for the very first time.

The package DigiCorp delivered to us consisted of a cartridge tape containing the software, an 8" x 9" slipcase and three-ring binder containing the manual, a glossy sales brochure highlighting the main features and advantages of ScreenPlay, one page of installation instructions, three pages of "release notes" noting corrections to the manual, and one page of miscellaneous notes mentioning seven convenient procs that are included to help customers with programming. The manual is a very attractive, professional-looking job, typeset and printed in two colors. (Unfortunately for pirates, blue is used for all the text, making it difficult to photocopy.) While the documentation is readable and includes a variety of illustrations, it assumes the reader understands a lot of Pick jargon and programming concepts, so the manual can only be described as reference material for experienced programmers, and not, say, a tutorial-like textbook for inexperienced end users. As currently designed and implemented, ScreenPlay is really a programming tool, and only a programmer would be able to do much



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with the product. ScreenPlay is definitely *not* software you can put into the hands of typical end users and then expect them to be able to create useful applications, such as an order entry system. On the other hand, the packaging makes clear that DigiCorp has put some serious effort into the product, and it certainly is a refreshing change from so much of the Pick software that enters the market packaged with just a few pages of documentation output on the vendor's dot matrix printer.

Right after our copy of ScreenPlay arrived, DigiCorp called to let us know they would have to send us another copy. Apparently the original that was mailed included the wrong user modes. (Although written primarily in BASIC, ScreenPlay depends on two assembly language modes that must be loaded into the ABS area.) DigiCorp sent a replacement tape immediately, but by then our hardware vendor happened to inform us that a new operating system release tape was also coming, so we

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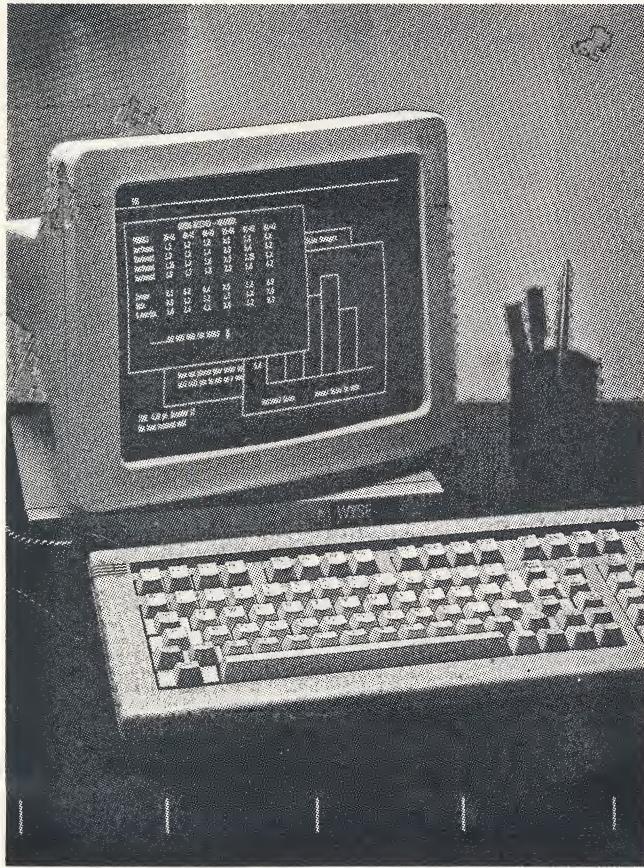
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postponed loading ScreenPlay until our machine's system software was up to date. By then, one more letter arrived from DigiCorp, explaining that a few enhancements had already been added to ScreenPlay back in the lab, and would be available on the new version that would be sent to us if we decided to purchase the product after our evaluation was complete.

The installation was smooth and simple, and could be accomplished in minutes by anyone familiar with ACCOUNT-RESTOREs, although we noticed the instructions forgot to mention detaching the tape drive. When ScreenPlay is invoked, it is supposed to display a main menu listing three options. Unfortunately, the display that was actually generated on our machine was all jumbled on the screen as though the cursor control was wrong. Sure enough, the proc generating the main menu contained a TERM statement setting the terminal characteristics for an ADDS Regent terminal, which we didn't have. We deleted the TERM from the proc, and the menu then displayed correctly.

It's fairly easy to explore and try out the various functions that ScreenPlay offers, since the documentation is keyed to a finished example built into the software (a screen for entering names and addresses) that provides a convenient demonstration of many of the system's features, although step-by-step instructions on how to build a name and address program from scratch would probably be an even better guide. The main bottleneck in learning about ScreenPlay is its use of control keys: just about every control key combination on the keyboard performs some kind of special function, and so it takes a few days of practice before all of the various editing and control features can be memorized. Fortunately, there are plenty of help messages that make it relatively painless to wade through the prompts and displays.

While ScreenPlay and its ability to interface with custom BASIC programs provide enough processing power to allow a programmer to create just about any kind of input program,

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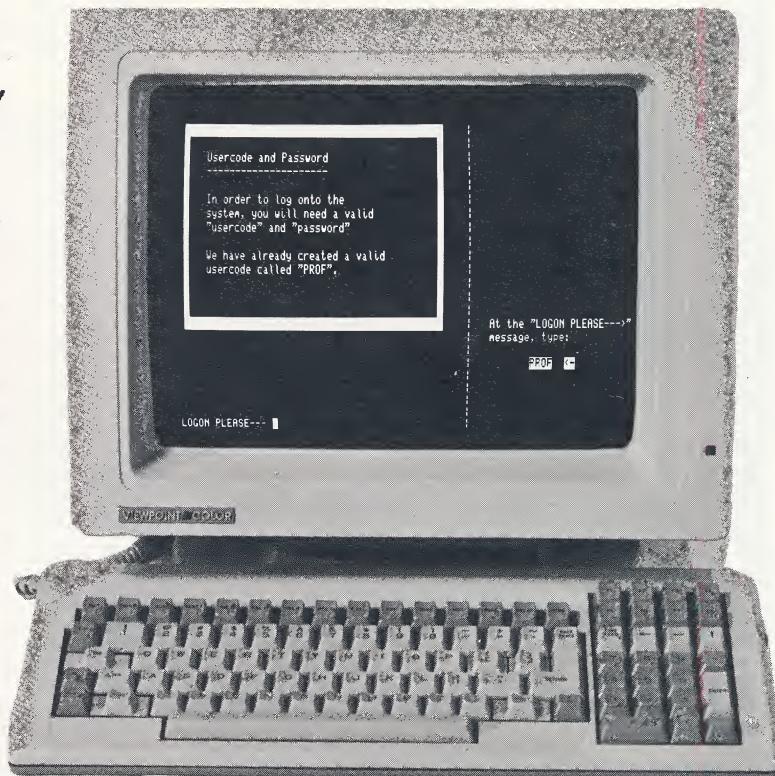
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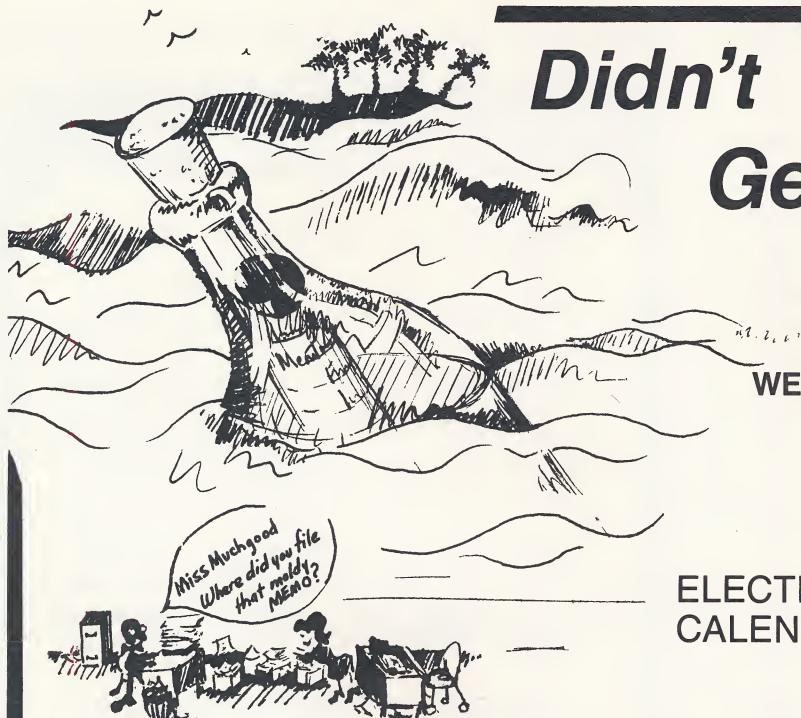
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there were a few features we were expecting to find, but didn't. For example, we were surprised that ScreenPlay doesn't provide a mechanism to choose between left and right justification for displayed fields. It's true that left justification is usually good enough, but an application displaying a column of numbers would want right justification. We had also hoped to test ScreenPlay by using it to solve our standard "acid test" for input processors: creating a purchase order entry screen containing multivalued line items, with each line item containing sub-multivalued delivery dates (in sorted order) along with associated sub-multivalued delivery quantities. Unfortunately, ScreenPlay doesn't provide sub-multivalue support, and so we abandoned our plans for that test.

One especially nice ScreenPlay feature is its support of intrafield editing, such as allowing Control-W to erase the last word in the



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current line being typed, or allowing Control-C to insert a character at the current cursor position in the middle of a field. With that kind of editing power, ScreenPlay can allow prompting and overtyping at each actual field position on the screen, and the programmer isn't forced to use a separate data entry line at the bottom of the screen so that operators won't get confused while overtyping previous data. (The lack of intrafield editing controls has long been a weakness in Pick software. On the other hand, we've also seen studies that claim fixed position prompting is less confusing and easier to learn.)

Can we recommend ScreenPlay? Yes and no. Yes, if you're an experienced programmer who is looking for a tool to create input programs, or if you're looking for a standard input system around which to create programs and make them conform (especially if you need intrafield editing, which we think is ScreenPlay's only important offering). No, if you're an end user or if you're trying to find a screen processor that will let end users do most of the work of creating an application. Even if your requirements are only for a programming tool, ScreenPlay's limitations mean it may not be the best input processor you can find. Since no input processor has yet taken the Pick market by storm, we expect many installations will continue to create their own input programs as they have in the past, even if it means hard-coding everything in BASIC. Actually, table-driven input processors (like ScreenPlay) that don't generate code are not that difficult to create, if they're kept simple. For example, we found that our own custom, home-grown input processor called GET essentially provides all of the capabilities of ScreenPlay, except for intrafield editing and multivalue windows larger than one line. Yet GET is not complicated software: based on programs originally published beginning with the November 1983 *Pragma*, GET consists of only two subroutines totaling 150 lines, a 75-line program to maintain parameter tables, and a handful of small utility programs and procs that provide miscellaneous support. △

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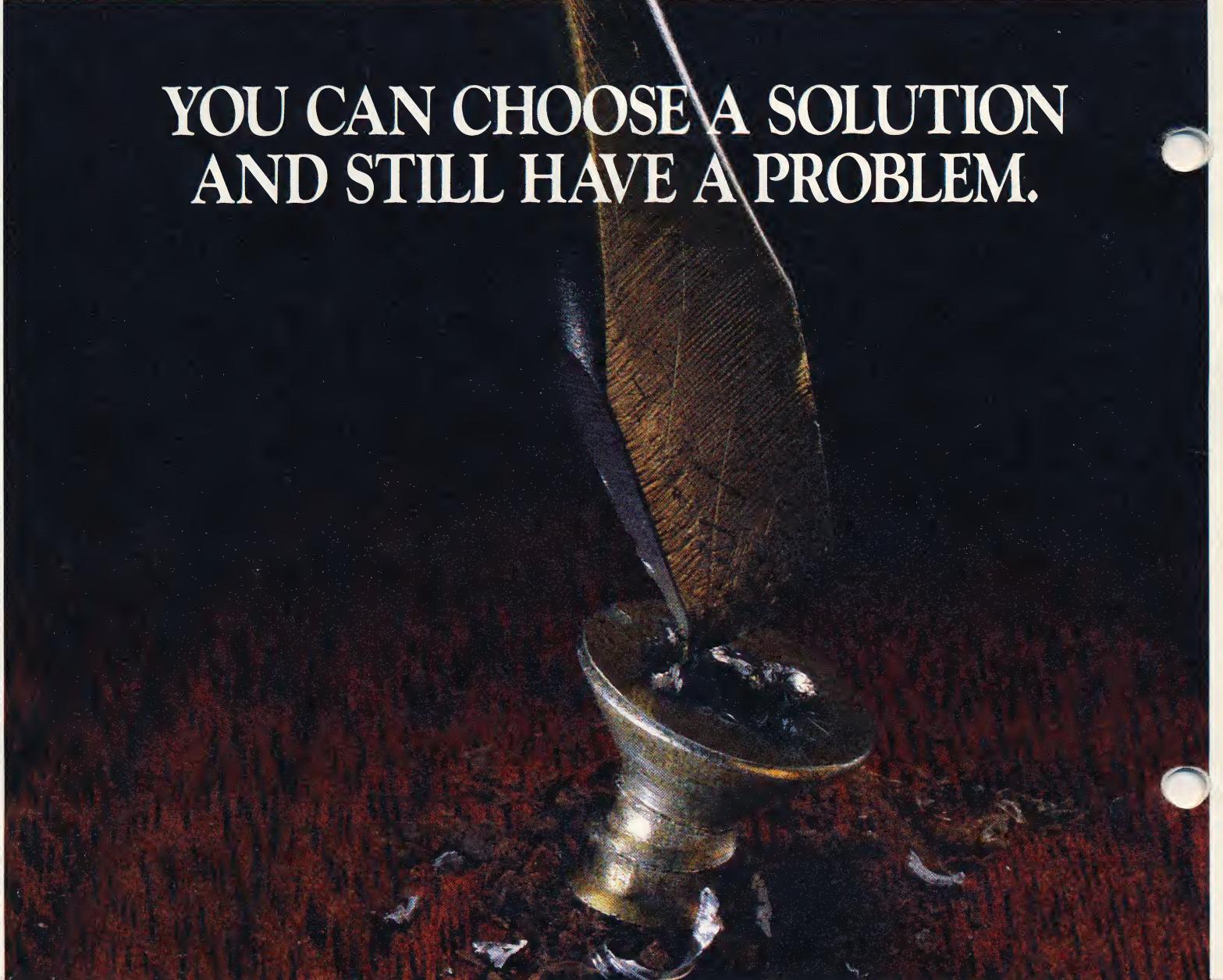
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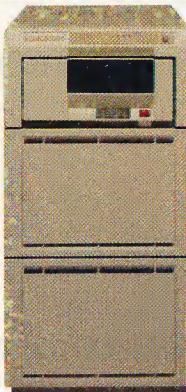


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